THE TOUGHEST ASSIGNMENT OF ALL

March 8, 1992

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Luke 6:27-33

"...Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you."

-Luke 6:27-28 (NRSV)

We got in the cab at Clark and Addison. It was a hot day. The Cubs had blown a three-run lead in the top of the ninth. Everybody was a little surly. Three blocks down Clark Street traffic stopped for a parade. "No problem," our driver assured us as he turned left down a long one-way street, only to stop again at the end of the street for the same parade. "No problem," he said, but this time he was upset and shared with us his opinions about the folks who were parading. Up over the curb - U turn - back up the one-way street, the wrong way - horns blaring.

Back on Clark Street, the driver of the cab beside us indicated that he wanted to be in our lane: would we give way? Our driver looked him in the eye - and ignored him; and when the light changed, accelerated as if to punctuate his dismissal of the other driver's request. At the next stop light, before we quite understood what was happening there was a loud pounding on the roof of the cab and at the driver's window was the passenger from the other cab, face purple with rage and a few too many Wrigley Field refreshments, screaming obscenities at our driver, who again, rather coolly I thought, ignored him, looking straight ahead, except for a simple, but rather eloquent hand gesture. This prompted our guest to new heights of rage, including a reference to our driver's ethnicity, which happened to be Taiwanese. My mild bemusement started to become concern.

The light changed. But now our driver, pondering our guest's closing statement, was visibly agitated. "Nobody talks to me like that" he announced. "I have a black belt." He slammed on the brakes, jumped out onto Clark Street and beckoned to the passenger in the cab behind us, invited him, and his girlfriend and the other driver onto the street to resolve this

matter in a definitive way. It was time, obviously to do something. So I rolled down the window and entered the conversation by announcing that the meter was running, and either he got in and drove on or we were getting out. For some reason, it worked. He dropped his hands, got back in and drove us home.

Aggression, retaliation, "Nobody says that to me," reciprocal disdain, assertiveness, pushiness. Urban survival skills, it sometimes seems. You want to live in the city, you've got to be tough and fast.

One time Jesus of Nazareth said:

> "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you."

And it is no exaggeration to suggest that few of his words trouble us more. For certain, there are few words of his which have elicited more scholarly and literary attention. Surely he didn't mean it! Surely someone heard it wrong! Surely whatever meaning is here is metaphor, or allegory, or simile! Surely he didn't mean to love your abuser.

Archibald Hunter, distinguished scholar of the New Testament, a generation ago spoke for most students: "Literal obedience to these instructions would only result in violence, robbery and anarchy." [A Pattern for Life, p. 57]

And so there have been a variety of ways to interpret:

-He was engaging in hyperbole, for instance. His notion of love for the enemy is so beyond anything human beings can do, it serves actually to illustrate how profoundly we need God's help.

-Or, it is an ethic so strenuous, that the only way it can be lived is apart from the world, in a monastery for instance.

-Or, it is the ethic of the Kingdom of God, not the kingdom of the world. As a citizen in both, the individual must decide when it is appropriate to hate an enemy and when it is necessary to love him.

-Or, it is an ideal, a lofty, inspiring goal to which we must aspire; an "impossible possibility," someone put it.

Roger Shinn of Union Seminary observes wryly that world leaders have mostly wiped their feet on the notion. And the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche put into words what many people wonder about when he said that an ethic based on love for enemies and doing good to people who are doing harm to you is an ethic for the weak and cowardly and deserves contempt, not respect.

For four thousand years the human race has believed that survival depends on a system of rules and related punishments based on the notion of retribution. "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." It's in the Code of Hammurabi and the date is the 20th century, B.C., 2,000 years before the common era, 500 years before Moses. The provision in the Hammurabi Code, by the way, is there to restrain and regulate the natural propensity toward retribution. "No more than eye for eye," that is to say. When wrong is done, a debit appears on the ledger of society. The offender must pay, make amends, punishment to suit the crime.

The ancient law of Israel commanded love for neighbor, which meant fellow Israelite, but was as accommodating to hatred of the enemy as anybody else's law. It's interesting how frequently it shows up in the Psalter -

Psalm 29 - evildoers are doomed to destruction.

Psalm 94 - God will repay them for
their iniquity and wipe them out.

And even in the middle of one of the loveliest,

Psalm 139 - "Thou hast searched me
and known me...
O that you would kill the
wicked...
I hate them with a perfect
hatred."

Sometimes the zealous love for God somehow becomes hatred for other human beings. Discovered in the writings and manuals of the Dead Sea Qumra Community is this -

> "love all that he has elected and hate all that he has cast aside... love all the sons of light and hate all the sons of darkness. [see Eduard Schweitzer, The Good News According to Matthew]

Hatred for the enemy, retaliation for an offense, just retribution; together they constitute one of the oldest human traditions. Sociologists tell us that many societies define themselves in terms of the enemy whom everybody hates and that once the enemy disappears societies often don't know who they are anymore. It is also a way, sociologists tell us, to avoid acknowledging and discussing internal problems in depth. Facism always needs someone on which to focus its hatred. With the collapse of Communism some commentators are seeing the West with no one to hate and with a major identity crisis.

And internally, isn't it ironic that we really do seem to understand what is behind the epidemic of crime and street violence. But our fear paralyzes us, and so we turn again to our 4,000-year-old remedy - revenge, "eye for an eye," capital punishment, which no one seriously argues deters crime, but which certainly does make us feel better about ourselves apparently.

And so, was it not one of his most courageous moments, perhaps one of his most profound, when he said:

> "Love your enemy, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you."

Was it not one of his bravest moments when he named what we know in our hearts to be true, but do not ordinarily have the courage or creativity to live out, namely that revenge and retaliation and retribution constitute, in terms of history and human relations, the most colossal of failures, the greatest of all lies?

The truth is - it doesn't work. It doesn't make things better. It doesn't heal and create new possibilities. "An eye for an eye," someone observed, merely leaves two people blind. Hate breeds hate. The Fascists have always known it. Neo-Nazis know it. The Ku Klux Klan knows it. Mussolini simply asked for it - "that cold, conscious, implacable hate, hate in every home, which is indispensable for victory." [see Roger Shinn, The Sermon on the Mount, p. 46]

We have come too far to afford it any longer. The New York Times this morning reports that there are 200,000,000 privately owned guns in this country. Sales of handguns are down slightly; manufacturers are planning a new marketing initiative. And so there is a certain tragic inevitability about life in the ghetto. Hatred plus an automatic weapon or a hand gun, produces dead people. Lost Boys, Anna Quindlen called them (New York Times, 3/1/92). Kahlil Sumpter, 15, shot Ian Moore, 17, and Tyrone Sinkler, 16, on the second floor hallway of Thomas Jefferson High School in New York last week and no one seems to know why, except he had a "beef" with them and a gun and the three of them live in a culture which celebrates and ornaments and sexualizes and sings about and captures on film and even protects the right to purchase the gun to do what he did. They "disliked" each other. So the result of the oldest human tradition around is no longer an eye for an eye. It's a life - death - for wearing your baseball cap wrong.

So maybe it's time to listen to the brave, lonely rabbi, when he says, "love your enemy and pray for those who abuse you." Maybe it's time to entertain the heretofore outrageous notion that Jesus, with his "love your neighbor" is the realist, the

only pragmatist around, and that the utopians, the really silly idealists, are those who continue to hold onto retaliation, revenge, hate your enemy. Get even, give them what they deserve.

There is a short detour which we must explore. This love he urges us to have for our enemy, our abuser, is not indulgence.

The word "abuser" itself has come to have a terrible new meaning, a behavior pattern which our society is finally acknowledging - spouse abuse, child abuse, physical abuse, mental abuse, sexual abuse - harm done years ago which lives in the human heart in destructive and painful ways. And the worst of it has been the notion that the abused was at fault, did something wrong, deserved it, asked for it. Worst of all, sometimes that idea, that submission to abuse, has been related to these words of Jesus.

So let us be very clear - abuse must never be tolerated passively. To love your enemy and bless your abuser will mean to find a way to end the abusive behavior.

The relevant point, which we are coming to understand, is that the residue of anger and hatred left in the life of the abused, must be healed before life becomes whole again.

This love he urges us to have for our enemy is not soft. It is not indulgence. It is one of the best words in our vocabulary - Agape - "unabashed good will, love which seeks nothing in return," the love of God, actually, operating in human lives, a bit of the incarnation, actually.

Be glad he didn't say "like your enemies," Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote in a Georgia jail cell. "How can you like someone who is threatening your children and bombing your home?" [Strength to Love, p. 44]

So don't define this love for our enemy he wants us to have on the basis of your love for your beloved which is called out of us by their sweetness, or into which we fall, delightfully, involuntarily. That's Philia and Eros - thank God. Agape isn't feeling - it is your will, your heart and soul and mind working hard, focusing, channeling something of God's love into life's most difficult and potentially damaging situations.

Jesus taught, and we know, that hatred is as harmful to the one who hates as it is to the one hated, perhaps more so. But does it work? May I suggest that the answer is so clear and so overwhelmingly positive that we often cannot see it.

Martin Luther King, Jr. knew the raw power of love to change hearts and nations. Said he:

> "We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering with our capacity to endure suffering. Do to us what you will, and we will continue to love you. Throw us in jail and we shall still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our community at the midnight hour and beat us and leave us half dead, and we shall still love you. But be assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. One day we shall win freedom but not only for ourselves... we shall win you in the process." [op. cit. p. 49]

In his second Inaugural address, Abraham Lincoln said these words:

> "With malice toward none: with charity for all, let us strive to finish the work we are in: to bind up the nation's wounds: to care for him who shall have borne the battle."

How could he talk like that, a woman asked, about people who hated him? And he said, "Do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?"

Does it work? Did you see the interview in the front of Time Magazine last week on "The Cantor and the Klansman?" [2/27/92] Larry Trapp, Klan Grand Dragon, took it on himself to harass and ultimately drive from the community of Lincoln, Nebraska, Michael Weisser, a Jew, a Cantor at his Synagogue. Weisser received threatening phone calls and anti-Semitic hate mail. He knew where it was coming from. He was afraid, but he responded very differently. He started to call his tormentor, got on his answering machine after the anti-Semitic diatribe Trapp had recorded and offered to take Trapp, who is confined to a wheel chair, to the grocery store. He kept at it, kept leaving messages. Finally, the Klansman called him back, identifying himself and said, "What do you want? You're harassing me." Finally he called Weisser and said, "I want to get out of this and I don't know how."

Weisser said, "I'll bring dinner and we'll talk." His wife brought along a silver ring as a peace offering. When they met face-to-face finally, Klansman and Cantor, Larry Trapp burst into tears.

Does it work? Well, sometimes. Sometimes a Martin Luther King, Jr. is so persuasive, the oppressed are actually inspired to love their oppressor and to pray for their abusers and things change. But that's not the point actually.

The point is the healing and wholeness of the would-be disciples. The beneficiaries are not those who are no longer hated, but the ones who no longer live life out of their anger, rage, resentment, vengeance. What always changes is the heart and soul and life of the one who stops hating, the one who may have every reason to hate and get even. What changes is what Jesus said would change.

> "Love your enemies... and you will be children of the most high."

You will be God's child, that's all, not in name, but in actuality.

It was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, another prisoner with every reason to hate his tormentors - in his case the Nazis - who saw most clearly that this command to love the enemy is about the mystery of grace finally.

He wrote:

> "Love asks nothing in return, but seeks those who need it." [The Cost of Discipleship, p. 133]

So - be God's child when you are offended, tormented, don't respond in vengeance. Act in love toward that person who is your nemesis. Forgive your abuser. Don't overlook, or dismiss as unimportant, or accept as appropriate, your abuser. Stop allowing what happened to you in the past to continue shaping your future. But forgive him/her. Love your enemy. And be God's child - which is your reward.

It is Lent again, and where this journey ends is not at the bar of justice, where appropriate punishment is meted out, but at a cross, the most eloquent symbol of hatred, hatred between people - divided by race, religion, class - and the deeper animosity between human beings and God. Please do know again that we are, each of us, under that cross with its outstretched arms; each of us in some way not deserving to be there, not worthy of that love; please know, standing there in the human community beneath his cross, that there is only one way, and one truth, and one light in the darkness; and it is the one who took upon himself the whole world's hatred and said:

> "Love your enemies
> Do good to those who hate you
> Bless those who curse you
> Pray for those who abuse you."

Jesus, our crucified Christ.

Amen.